

NEW PUBLICATIONS.

ESOTERIC BUDDHISM.
By A. P. SINNETT. Pp. 218.
Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

About two years ago the author of this remarkable book published an equally singular volume, entitled "The Occult World." Its object was to assert the existence, in India and Tibet, of a peculiarly gifted fraternity of "Adepts," who were alleged to have mastered for themselves the most hidden truths of Nature, and who were put forward as the repositories of all trustworthy and important arcane knowledge. The present work is intended to supplement and carry forward the teachings of its predecessor. It contains an epitome of the doctrines held by the "Brothers," "Adepts," "Mahatmas," or "Arhats," as they appear to be almost indifferently called. Precisely why the author should have designated his book "Esoteric Buddhism," is not clear, for the reader is given to understand that the views set forth in it are really rather those of what may be styled the fundamental world-religion than of Buddhism. The claim is made upon the respectful attention of the world, that the strange and in some respects startling doctrines, rests upon an assumption which, if accepted, must certainly inspire confidence. For, to use Mr. Sinnett's own words, the esoteric doctrine is not "presented to us as the invention of no written scriptures. Its views of nature have been evolved by the researches of an immense succession of investigators, qualified for their task by the possession of spiritual faculties and perceptions of a higher order than those belonging to ordinary humanity. In the course of ages the block of knowledge thus accumulated, concerning the origin of the world and of man, and the ultimate destinies of our race—concerning also the nature of other worlds and states of existence differing from those of our present life—checked and examined at every point, verified in all directions, and constantly under examination throughout, has come to be looked upon by its custodians as constituting the absolute truth concerning spiritual things, the actual state of the facts regarding vast regions of vital activity lying beyond this earthly existence."

It is in fact claimed that all the statements made concerning man's Whence and Whither by the Adepts are the result, not of speculation but of practical observation and experiment by their fraternity. But it is not asserted that they possess any supernatural powers. On the contrary, they explicitly declare that they know derived from natural science and law. They say that they have merely cultivated their spiritual faculties and perceptions to a degree unknown and almost incomprehensible to the Western world, and that by so doing they have enabled themselves to penetrate the secrets of the universe, and to attain to a full understanding of perhaps all but primal causes. In the course of his education the Adept is said to become acquainted with natural laws which enable him to do many surprising things, but Mr. Sinnett says that the acquisition of the power, whose occasional exercise awes the vulgar, is merely an incident of adeptship, the great end and purpose of which is "the achievement of spiritual development. In his present work Mr. Sinnett does not concern himself to adduce any further evidence for the reality of the Adept Brotherhood. He takes that for granted, and proceeds to the development of the esoteric doctrines. The study of esoteric Buddhism affords little clue to these occult teachings. The popular expectations of the Buddhist canon have resulted in purchasing the Western mind very thoroughly. The esoteric doctrine of Nirvana especially has proved a stumbling-block to Western scholarship. Professor Max Müller, it is true, has more than half-grasped the real conception lying behind it, and has refused to accept the theory of annihilation. Professor Rhys Davids, however, has persuaded himself that the annihilation hypothesis is the only tenable one, and consequently has failed to find a rational explanation of the strong hold Buddhism has upon the minds of its votaries. The esoteric doctrine clears up this and several other mysteries, however. As a system of thought it must be admitted to be both comprehensive and elevated. No system known to Western philosophy, indeed, approaches it in sublimity, majesty and consistency. It may without any exaggeration be claimed for it that it is the only system which at all satisfactorily accounts for some of the hardest problems that have taxed human ingenuity—such, for example, as the origin and purpose of Evil.

Esoteric Buddhism is tainted by no anthropomorphic fallacies, or belittled by any geocentricities. It posits the planet we inhabit as merely one in a chain of worlds through which human evolution is being accomplished. It asserts that man has an illimitable past as well as an illimitable future. It declares that his present life is but one link in a long chain of existences through which he has to pass, at each remove either rising or descending, according to the tenor of his acts in the preceding stage of active life. It says that the destiny of every individual is the result of a balance of his good and evil deeds, and that while the good deeds are rewarded in a temporary heaven called Devachan, the bad deeds must be expiated in the conditions of the next succeeding incarnation. This balance of good and evil is called Karma, and it is the Fate of Buddhism. But the Occultists also teach that the final destiny of mankind cannot yet be determined; that when that stage of evolution has been reached in which the living race can make an intelligent choice between Spiritual and merely material life, the final struggle will have to be fought out, by the those only who at that time choose the higher good will be able to pursue their development to its normal end, the evolution of a race so far beyond present humanity as to seem to our unaided vision almost divine. The Adepts hold that the present intellectual development of Europe and America is all in wrong directions; that Spiritualism, the one reality and important consideration, is being lost sight of; that the modern type of civilization is self-destructive, and that the modern abandonment of Spirituality is endangering the future existence of the races which hold themselves to be "the heirs of all the ages, in the foremost files of time." This is a startling doctrine, but it is necessary to the consistency of Esoteric Buddhism; for if these doctrines be true, if the present stage of human existence is a mere incident in a chain extending backward and forward for millions of years; if the highest conception of modern civilization fails to give it more than a transitory value; then indeed it must be admitted that we are on the wrong track, and that we need new charts and fresh pilots. The Occultists do not limit themselves to the mere contemplation of Asiatic Occultism indeed are steps. The Adepts hold no limitations in the universe. Beside man in his most proud, he discovers "boundless better, boundless worse." It conceives of man himself as far advanced beyond his present development as that beyond his spiritual progenitors; it declares that all civilizations rise only to decay; that population is succeeded by population; that the population of the earth, change, and will change; that the civilizations coming with life, to uplift long-buried mountain ranges, to shift the centres of human and geological activity, to drive out dominant races, and to bring the feeble and backward once to the front. Yet it affirms that all these portentous catastrophes, all these cataclysmic events, are of small importance. Not only is evolution carried forward. When a race has lost its way, as it were; when its cultivation of mere intellect has blinded it hopelessly to Spiritual concerns, Nature steps in to save it for a better future in spite of it, by putting an end to that stage of its activity.

According to Esoteric Buddhism humanity consists of seven principles. These are designated as follows: (1) The Body (*Rupa*); (2) Vitality (*Prana* or *Jiva*); (3) Astral Body (*Linga Sharira*); (4) Astral Soul (*Kama Rupa*); (5) Human Soul (*Manas*); (6) Spiritual Soul (*Buddhi*); (7) Spirit (*Atma*). All of these principles are more or less merged in one another during life, but at death the first three are finally separated, and dissolve and disappear, the second principle, or Vitality, not perishing, but attaching itself to some other form of organic life. The destruction of the remaining principles is by no

means uniform. If the life has been very spiritual (not in the orthodox sense, however), the whole of the four principles pass into Devachan, which is a state, not a place, which is purely subjective, and in which the spirit enjoys the fruition of its highest aspirations during a considerable period, and until the time has arrived for its next incarnation. At the close of the Devachanic period Karma comes into play, and the conditions of the next incarnation are dependent upon the balance of good and evil in the preceding existence. At the end of every life, or rather at the beginning of every new life, the spirit ceases to remember preceding existences, but the Adepts teach that when at length the long chain of lives has been lived through, and the summit of spiritual development has been reached, the memory of the Ego will be restored, and it will recognize each one of its many transformations, from the beginning to the end. The metempsychosis of the Esoteric Buddhists is not that of Pythagoras, nor that of Exoteric Buddhism. They do not allow that the spirit of man, having once reached the human point of development, can revert to animal forms; but they assert that before man was man he was an animal and many other things, and this doctrine ranges curiously with that most modern of scientific hypotheses, the Darwinian theory. Indeed, the Occult teachers point to all that is best established in modern science, especially in geology and embryology, as supporting their doctrines. They say, for example, that the tradition of the lost continent of Atlantis is merely the lingering remembrance of a great historical fact, and they point to the soundings of the Challenger in confirmation of their assertion. But one of the features of Esoteric Buddhism which is sure to excite a good deal of controversy in a certain quarter is its attitude toward the phenomena of Spiritualism. The Adepts say that human spirits cannot and do not return to the earth, and they account for the manifestations of the seance-room by alleging that the influences and appearances heard, felt and seen there are merely what they style "shells," or feebly conscious remains of deceased persons, consisting of the fourth and fifth principles, vivified for the moment by the vitality of the medium. Of course such a doctrine strikes at the very foundations of modern Spiritualism, for if the "controls" and "guides," and all the alleged spirit influences of the seance-room are mere shadows or *simulacra*, possessing no separate intelligence and doomed to destruction shortly and perish, it is plain that the believers in the usefulness of studying that kind of phenomena will be compelled to review their faith in the most destructive way. Nor can they fail to perceive that the Adept theory affords an explanation of many of the most perplexing phases of Spiritualism, and in particular clears up that long-standing puzzle of the chronic intellectual feebleness manifested so commonly by alleged spirits. If they are "shells," and not real spirits, it is possible to understand their imbecility; but on the Spiritual hypothesis it is not intelligible at all.

Esoteric Buddhism has been charged with atheistic tendencies. Esoteric Buddhism can hardly be so accused, for while it knows nothing of a personal God, it clearly recognizes the government of the universe by laws whose maker must, of necessity, be superior to his phenomena. It, however, professes to have no knowledge of any higher spiritual beings than the Dhyani Chohans, or Planetary Spirits, who are said to be perfected human beings, and who exercise a sort of regency over the planetary chain, though under limitations imposed by the general cosmic laws which they cannot transcend. The best proof that the Esoteric Buddhists do not regard Nirvana as annihilation consists in the fact that they regard these Planetary Spirits as having attained Nirvana. That state, indeed, is an inconceivable condition of felicity and practical omniscience, and the aim of the Dhyani Chohans who have reached it, as the aim of Buddha was, is to help as many mortals as possible forward in the way which leads to it.

We have but glanced at some of the salient topics of Mr. Sinnett's book, which, by the way, he puts forth not on his own responsibility, but rather as the mouthpieces of the Mahatmas, or Adepts, from whom all his information purports to be derived. By the student of Buddhism, or of Oriental religions generally, it will at once be seen that in this volume are gathered together what may be styled revised statements of many of the doctrines which are found in Brahminism and Hinduism, as well as in the religion of Gautama. The Adepts explain this by alleging that all the primitive religions possess admimations of the great central truths of the universe. Buddhism, however, they say has kept nearer to these truths than any other, and above all it has been above all religions, "first pure and then peaceful." It has never been stained by persecutions. Intolerance is foreign to it. It has suffered and has not sought revenge. It has cultivated a humanity and a gentle courtesy the like of which have almost disappeared from the Western world. The esoteric doctrines of the Adepts, as well as the religion of Gautama, advanced in behalf of these new-old theories. To a growing element in Europe and this country the religion upon which modern civilization rests has ceased to offer assurance or consolation. The dogmatism of physical science has superseded the dogmatism of theology, and the reaction threatens to land the next generation in a materialism destitute of all incentives to progress even of the most sordid kind. While faith and spirituality are disappearing from the Western nations, the "brooding East" once more stands upon a grander level, the problems of life, and compels us, by the very contrast these offer to our newest theories, to ask ourselves with some seriousness whether, indeed, we are not right as we have thought ourselves. It is not probable that either Christians or Jews, who are the products of purely Western culture, will be ready to accept the claims made in behalf of the truths of the Buddhistic doctrines. But even those who refuse to admit the existence of the Adepts, or who regard them as charlatans if they do exist, will perhaps none the less appreciate the breadth and loftiness of the concepts which are now published as by their authority. Mr. Sinnett might have elaborated much which he has merely outlined. He might have cleared up many points which he has left obscure. But he has certainly written a book which is destined to be widely read, and which, no matter how it is criticised, must suggest many wholesome thoughts to its readers. It is, moreover, fully in accord for the most part with a current of modern thought which has been quietly strengthening during the last few years, and which may eventually culminate in a more hopeful reaction against the gross materialism of the day than has been possible hitherto.

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